NEW
NICK CARTER WEEKLY

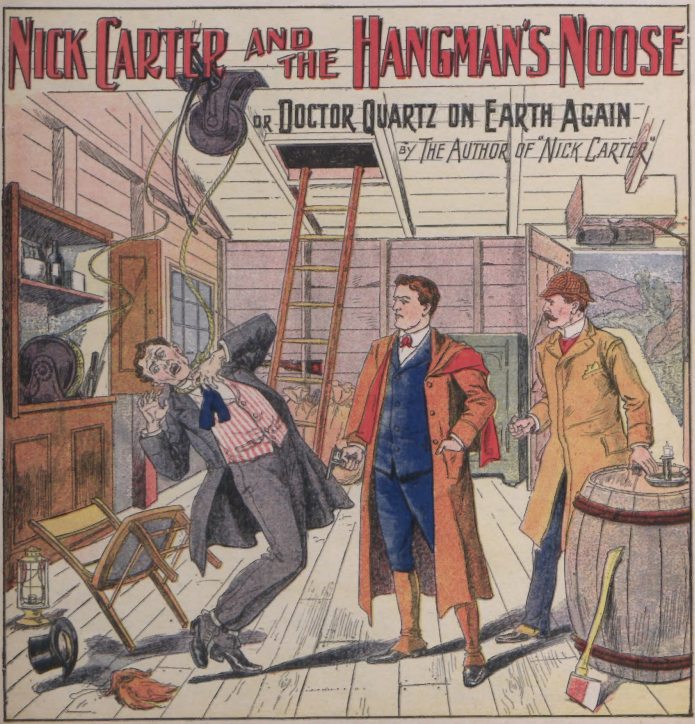
Issued Weekly. By Subscription $2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at New York Post Office by STREET & SMITH, 238 William St., N. Y.

No. 419. Price, Five Cents.

NICK CARTER AND THE HANGMAN'S NOOSE

OR DOCTOR QUARTZ ON EARTH AGAIN

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"



As Nick spoke, the noose closed at Crystal's throat, and jerked him in the air. Crystal made a frantic grab at the rope, and attempted to gurgle something to the detective.

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No. 419. NEW YORK, January 7, 1905. Price Five Cents.

Nick Carter and the Hangman's Noose;

OR,

DR. QUARTZ ON EARTH AGAIN.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

THE VANISHING OF ZANONI.

Nick Carter and Inspector McClusky encountered each other on the street directly in front of the Morton House, at Union Square. The former was on his way to police headquarters and the latter was bound for Nick Carter's residence, so the meeting was a fortunate one.

"Well met," said the inspector. "I was just on my way to find you."

"And I," replied Nick, "was bound for your office to have a chat with you."

"Good!" said the inspector. "Now where shall we go; back to my office, or to your house?"

"Neither," said Nick. "Let's go in here and have a chop while we talk."

Seated at the table, it was the inspector who began the conversation.

"I don't suppose you have forgotten that beautiful little fiend, Zanoni, have you, Nick?" he asked.

"Hardly."

"Have you kept track of her since she was sent to Dannemora prison?"

"Not especially—that is, not since the time she

played the part of the prison demon so well and came so near to getting scot-free out of the place."

"What do you know about her since that time? Let us see how well our information on the subject agrees."

"Why, there isn't much about it, is there?"

"No; not much; only I want to see if we have the same information."

"What is new about her, inspector?"

"I'll tell you in a moment; but first, answer my question."

"Well, you know I was present at the time the guard, Price, was compelled to hit her over the head with the butt of his pistol in order to save his own life and to prevent her from making her escape. That happened in the underground passages that were dug by the old prisoner, Ruloff."

"Yes; I know about that. Go on."

"Why, after that she was taken back to her cell in the woman's prison. She recovered consciousness for about an hour, and then lapsed into insensibility again. I understand that she has remained in that condition ever since; and that was—let me see—last November."

"Exactly. And it is now the first day of May. Six months is a long time for a person to lie in that comatose condition, Nick."

"I should say so; but I have always understood that it was only a semiunconsciousness, or a semiconsciousness, whichever you please to call it. She could be roused almost to consciousness whenever it was necessary to give her food, or when she needed attention."

"Yes; that is right. They could rouse her for a moment, five minutes, sometimes for a quarter of an hour at a time, feed her, and then she would lapse again into the same state of apparent stupor."

"I have always understood," said Nick, "that the doctors who attended her have regarded her case as a very interesting one. When she was transferred to the hospital some of the best physicians from the city consulted over her, and I believe her case has afforded them considerable interesting study ever since that time. I don't know much more about it than that."

"There is not really any more than that, save that she has, for these six months, not once uttered a single word to her nurses or to anybody, and that immediately after she had been fed and otherwise attended to, she has always dropped away into that inexplicable sleep again from which she could be aroused only by the application of a galvanic battery. You know all about that, don't you?"

"Surely."

"Now, Nick, do you believe that Zanoni could have been imposing on the doctors all that time?"

"Eh? No. At least, I hadn't thought about it. I supposed the physicians who studied her case were so expert, and so great that they knew what they were talking about. I know that the general diagnosis of the case was something to the effect that there was a pressure against some part of the brain, induced by the blow she received from the butt of Price's pistol, and I know that trepanning has been talked about, but that it has never been performed. The majority of the doctors insisted that in time she would come out of the condition naturally, did they not?"

"Yes; and she has."

"What?"

"At least that is the supposition."

"The supposition! Don't they know?"

"They might possibly know, if they could have an opportunity to view their patient."

"Great guns, inspector, you don't mean to say that she has——"

"Vanished? Yes."

Nick stared at the inspector and remained silent.

"Tell me about it," he said, presently.

"There isn't anything to tell save the bare truth. She has disappeared. That is all that anybody knows about it. Now, the point is, do you believe that she could have been fooling those doctors all this time? Could she have played that part so well that even the best physicians in the country were deceived, or is she still in that state and has she been stolen away by some one or more of her old-time followers and friends?"

"You'll have to give me an easier one, inspector."

"Give it up, eh?"

"I'll have to do so."

"Anyhow, she's gone."

"How did she go?"

"Nobody knows."

"Just disappeared, eh?"

"Vanished. That is the word."

"How is it the word?"

"Well, fifteen minutes before the time that her disappearance was discovered, she was lying on her cot exactly as she has been doing for the last six months and practically in the same position; then, one of the nurses happened to pass near her cot and discovered that it was vacant. A search was immediately instituted but not a trace of her could be found; not a person, even among the patients, had seen her leave her cot, or had seen anybody near her cot. She was gone and that was all there was about it."

"Did it happen in the daytime, or in the night?"

"In the night, of course, when there was only one nurse on duty in that ward—or she may have had charge of two or three wards for all I know. Zanoni was gone, anyhow."

"But, admitting that she might have left the ward unobserved—that is, that the nurse's back was turned and that all the other patients were sleeping—how could she get out of the building?"

"Doors are usually locked on the inside, aren't they?"

"Yes; but there is always, night and day, somebody on duty at the door of that hospital."

"The best policemen and the best guards sometimes fall asleep on duty," said the inspector, sententiously.

"True," replied Nick. "Was the door found unlocked?"

"Yes; it was."

"Then that explains how she left the building."

"I wish it did; but it doesn't."

"Why not?"

"Because half the time that door is not locked at all, as I have since discovered."

"The guard at the door is considered sufficient, I suppose."

"Yes; that is it."

"Does this particular guard admit having slept on duty?"

"No; he swears that he did not sleep a wink, and that he was not absent from his post for a moment of time. He also swears that there was not a person who came near that door during all the time he was on duty, except that a man brought a package to the hospital and left it with him to be delivered in the morning."

"The package was for one of the patients, I suppose."

"It was for Zanoni."

"Oh, it was, eh? What did it contain?"

"Flowers. Carnations, in fact."

"What time was the package left there with the doorman?"

"Very soon after half-past one in the morning."

"What time did Zanoni disappear?"

"Between half-past one and a quarter of two."

"It would seem, then, that there might be some connection between the two incidents, eh?"

"It would seem so, yes."

"What does the doorman say about the man with the package?"

"Merely that somebody rapped on the door instead of ringing the big bell; he opened the door and saw a man standing there with a package wrapped in tissue paper, in his hand; the man apologized for disturbing the watchman at that hour, but explained that he was leaving the city on an early train in the morning and that he wished to leave those flowers at the hospital for one of the patients; he also explained that he had rapped on the door instead of ringing the bell in order not to disturb any of the patients who might be sleeping; and he asked the doorman if he would be kind enough to see that the flowers were delivered in the morning, to the patient to whom they were addressed, and he gave him a silver dollar for his trouble. The watchman says he went away after that."

"Did the man step inside the hall at all?"

"Yes. He came inside, and the watchman closed the door while they were talking."

"And after they had completed the arrangements about the flowers—what then?"

"The watchman says the man went away again; that he opened the door for him, let him out, and closed it again."

"Did he lock it when he closed it?"

"He is not sure, but he doesn't think he did."

"Does he describe the man?"

"Tall, handsome, perfectly dressed, about thirty or thirty-five years old, smooth face, brown hair which curled around his forehead, straight, soldier-like carriage, and the air of being a personage. The watchman believed him to be some person of importance."

"After the man had gone, what did the watchman do?"

"Seated himself in his chair close to the door. He says he did not leave it again till the nurse came down to tell him that one of her patients was missing, and that even then he did not go out of sight of it. It was not his duty to search for a lost patient; his part consisted in seeing that no person passed in or out of that door without his knowledge."

"And I suppose he is positive that no person did so."

"He is very positive about it."

"All the same, Zanoni went out through that door, eh?"

"She couldn't have gone out any other way. But the point is, Nick, do you believe she could have gone out without being carried out? Do you believe she was able to walk out?"

"It does not seem possible, does it?"

"No; and for more reasons than one. Even admitting that she has been playing a part, and has succeeded in fooling the doctors—which is hardly tenable—but even admitting that, a perfectly healthy person, who had been lying in bed almost without moving for six months, would be so weakened by that experience alone that walking would have become an impossibility according to my reasoning."

"One would suppose so," admitted Nick.

"Well, no matter how much we reason about it, the fact remains that Zanoni has vanished; and it is up to us to find out what became of her. If she was well enough to walk out of that hospital, she is well enough to pay the penalties for her crimes, and we have got to find her, Nick."

CHAPTER II.

THE PUPIL OF DR. QUARTZ.

"All right," said Nick. "Now, if you please, we will drop that interesting subject for a moment. I have got one to discuss with you which may possibly have some bearing upon it, however. You remember when we met outside, I told you that I was on my way to your office?"

"Yes."

"Do you happen to remember all that I once told you about that interesting pupil of Dr. Quartz's—a Dr. Crystal by name?"

"Perfectly."

"He was indicted along with Zanoni and Quartz, for The Great hotel murders in Kansas City, you remember?"

"Yes."

"Do you recall the history of those trials?"

"Not particularly. I didn't pay much attention to them."

"Crystal was not tried until after the conviction of Quartz. Then, in the due course of events which sometimes work very slowly in criminal cases, he was arraigned, tried, convicted and sentenced. Now, it appears that his attorneys were unusually alert in his interests. They succeeded in obtaining a certificate of reasonable doubt and a second trial was ordered. In the meantime, he was brought back from the State prison to the city."

"That history doesn't sound unlike some of the experiences we have in criminal cases in this State."

"No; it does not. But let me continue."

"Go on."

"Since that time, Crystal's case has hung fire. It has been set down for trial several times, and each time postponed on one plea or another. Up to date the second trial has never taken place."

"I see."

"This morning I received a letter from my old friend the chief of police of Kansas City. I was taking that letter to your office to show to you when I met you just now. He says in it that he is writing to you at the same time, so may also have received a letter——"

"No; I have received none from him yet."

"Possibly he did not get it mailed as soon as mine. However, here is his letter. Read it for yourself."

Nick passed the letter over to the inspector, who read as follows:

"My dear Carter: Have you happened to meet Dr. Crystal on Broadway or in any of the cafe's of New York City? Probably not; but if you should happen to encounter him, would you mind telling him that I would like to see him? Tell him I am very anxious to have a talk with him and maybe he will be considerate enough to return here."

"The chief is facetious," said the inspector, looking up with a smile.

"Yes; but go ahead with the letter," replied Nick.

The letter continued:

"I suppose you know how his case has hung fire, so there is no use of my going into that. There have been so many other interesting affairs since his, to take up my attention, that I had about banished Crystal from my mind until yesterday, when the information came to me, through the usual channels, that he had grown tired of waiting in prison for his trial, and had 'flew de coop.' His manner of escape was the simplest one imaginable—bribery; and the man he bribed disappeared with him. He has, however, paid the penalty of his misdeed, for we have already found his body on the railroad tracks between here and Independence. It is evident that the man had disguised himself as a tramp and was getting out of the city by riding under a freight car, from which he fell and was crushed. He had ten thousand dollars in his pocket when found.

"However, Crystal, who is every bit as bad as Quartz, if not worse, has not thus far fallen into the soup from any car, so far as I can learn. I thought it would be well to inform you at once of his escape so that you could keep a lookout for him, and also because I have not a doubt that he will take measures at once to work for the liberation of his old friends Quartz, and that woman-wizard, Zanoni, so you might as well be on your guard. I understand that both are in Dannemora prison, but that is all I know about them.

"I shall write at once to Inspector McClusky, of your city, about this affair, and shall, in fact, send out a circular letter to the chiefs of police throughout the country about it."

The inspector returned the letter to the detective.

"How does that watchman's description of the man

with the carnations tally with your idea of this Dr. Crystal?" he asked.

"Pretty fair."

"You think it was Crystal?"

"I haven't a doubt of it."

"Why in blazes didn't the chief telegraph to us?"

"What difference would it have made if he had done so? We wouldn't have been looking for him at the door of that hospital at half-past one in the morning."

"Probably not."

"Nobody on earth ever thought but what Zanoni was just as she appeared to be, incapable of motion or speech—utterly incompetent to act."

"No; and I am not sure yet about that."

"Supposing the man with the flowers to have been Crystal, do you think the watchman permitted him to go upstairs, lift her from her bed, and carry her out of the hospital?"

"Well, no; I can hardly suppose that. If the watchman had been there alone, and there had been no other patients in that ward with Zanoni, I might think it, but there are too many other things to consider in the premises."

Both men were silent after that, for a considerable time. Both were thinking deeply.

At last Nick broke the hiatus.

"Inspector," he said, "you know, of course, that Zanoni is an adept in all the arts of magic?"

"Yes; I know it."

"There is not a trick performed by a Hindu fakir which she does not know how to reproduce."

"I have heard you make that statement before."

"Have you ever been in India and witnessed any of those tricks performed by those men on their own stamping ground?"

"No; I have not."

"Some of them are very wonderful."

"I suppose they are."

"You have heard about the trick which is performed by a fakir throwing himself into a state of suspended animation and permitting himself to be buried for a period of thirty days or more, haven't you? They are actually buried in the ground. The grave is watched by a selected committee. At the expiration of the time agreed upon, the grave is opened and the fakir steps out of it alive and well. It is a well-known trick, and has been witnessed by men of unquestionable integrity."

"Well, what of it?"

"Only this: Zanoni probably knows how to perform that trick."

"She hasn't done it, has she?"

"I don't know about that. Why may not that be the very thing she has been playing on the doctors all this time?"

"But, man alive, it has been six months!"

"To be sure; but also she has been roused out of her condition two or three times in every twenty-four hours. If she has the power of suspending animation in her own body at will, is it not possible that she may have been doing that very thing for the last six months?"

"It does not seem possible to me."

"If she has been playing a part of deception and has succeeded in fooling the doctors, the only way in which she could have done it successfully, according to my theory of the matter, would be by making use of that very trick which has puzzled the best scientist in the world, and puzzles them just as much to-day as it ever did."

"True enough," assented the inspector, "but even that does not explain how she got out of the hospital without being seen, or how Dr. Crystal appeared at the door, all the way from Kansas City, at the very moment she wanted him. I think, Nick, that I will ask

you to put everything else aside and to devote your energies to explaining this mystery. Will you do it?"

"You bet I'll do it," replied the detective.

CHAPTER III.

A MYSTERY FROM DANNEMORA PRISON.

The following morning brought another surprise to the detective.

It was in every way quite as startling as the others had been, for it told of the disappearance—of the vanishing, in fact—of Dr. Quartz from prison.

His escape from custody had been quite as remarkable as Zanoni's, too, and had been accompanied by much the same conditions and surrounded by almost identical circumstances.

The information came this time through one of the prison guards, a man by the name of Price, who was referred to in the last chapter as the one who had injured Zanoni on a former occasion when she had been attempting to make her escape from the same prison.

Price arrived at the detective's house shortly after the breakfast hour and was ushered to the private consultation room of the detective, where as soon as Nick Carter appeared, he announced without preface the object of his visit.

"Dr. Quartz is on earth again," he said.

"On earth!" replied Nick. "What in the world do you mean by that?"

"He has skipped; lit out; escaped; vanished."

"How?" asked the detective.

"You can search me, Mr. Carter."

"What do you mean by making use of that word, vanished?"

"Just what I say, for that is exactly what he did do."

"But how was such a thing possible?"

"I wish I knew how to answer you, but I don't."

"Where did he vanish from? The prison itself?"

"No; he was outside the prison at the time."

"Outside! How was that?"

"You know that once a week we take a certain number of our people for an hour or so of exercise outside the prison walls. We have never thought there was any danger in doing that, and this is the first time we have ever lost a prisoner in that way."

"I should think it would appear like a good opportunity for any prisoner to make his escape."

"It does not. They are too well guarded. Only a few have been taken at a time, and always there are four armed guards in attendance. At all events, this is the first time there has ever been an escape under that practice."

"There is always a first time."

"Yes, sir. And now it is Quartz."

"The worst prisoner you had."

"Not the worst prisoner, sir, as we reckon prisoners, but one of the best. Of late we had given him several privileges."

"I see. And this was one of them."

"Yes; but we had been taking him out for almost two months and he had never shown the slightest disposition to exceed the rules in any way."

"He was preparing the way for this escape."

"We know that now, of course, when it is too late."

"The warden, I suppose, sent you to me."

"Certainly. He says——"

"Never mind that. I know what he would say: That he would give everything he owns, or words to that effect, if I will find Quartz and take him back there."

"Yes, sir. That's about what he said."

"When did the escape occur?"

"Yesterday afternoon."

"Who were the guards? Were you one of them?"

"I was, as I am almost ashamed to admit."

"Well, tell me how it occurred."

"We were walking along a back road—you will remember that the day was an unusually pleasant one——"

"Yes, I remember. Cut out all that part of it. I wish to know merely about the incident."

"We were on the back road about a mile from the prison and had seated ourselves to rest a moment where the view was pleasant, when I saw a gentleman approaching along the road from the direction in which we were traveling.

"When he came near enough he stopped, and as I had withdrawn myself a little from the others, he approached me and opened a conversation."

"Wait. Describe the man," said Nick.

"He was tall and handsome and well dressed. About thirty-five years old, I should say. He was smooth shaven and looked like a minister. In fact, I thought he was one before he spoke and during the conversation which followed, he said he was."

"Humph!" said Nick.

"He walked very straight, like an officer in the army. His hair was brown and slightly curly. He wore a minister's collar and a high waistcoat. They have another name for it, I believe, but I don't know what it is."

"That will do," said the detective. "I know him."

"You know him!"

"Yes. He was Dr. Crystal, a friend and a pupil of Dr. Quartz."

"By thunder!" exclaimed Price. "I wish I had known it then."

"No doubt. And I wish that I might have been there when he spoke to you; but as neither of us can get our wish, what is the use? What did he have to say when he spoke to you?"

"Well, he began by talking about——"

"I don't want to know what he talked about; I want to know what he said and how he said it, just as nearl as you can remember."

"Very good, Mr. Carter. I'll try to give you ou exact conversation."

"That is what I wish."

"'This is a sorry spectacle, is it not?' he said to me

"'It is indeed, sir,' I replied, 'but after one ha been a witness of the same sort of thing for as long tc time as I have, one becomes accustomed to it.'

"He shook his head as if he did not agree with tha statement; then he said: 'You have been a priso guard a long time then. Might I ask your name?'

"'Price,' I replied.

"We were both silent a considerable time after that, during which he stood in a meditative manner apparently studying the group of prisoners."

"How many did you have with you at the time?' asked Nick.

"Nine."

"And four guards. Very well, go ahead. Your companion was standing in a meditative manner studying the prisoners. What happened then?"

"He turned to me again and asked me if there were any notorious prisoners among them."

"Tell me what he said."

"He said: 'Have you any great criminals or notorious prisoners among these?'

"'Not especially,' I told him. 'These are mostly quiet ones. We do not take the others out.'

"'Ah!' he said; and then he added: 'I have long wished to visit a prison and to converse with some of the men confined in such a place. I am a minister of the gospel, you know, so you can understand the wish. These are all very quiet fellows, you say?'

"'Yes, sir.'

"'I have always been timorous about entering a prison. These men are all entirely harmless, you say?'

"'Perfectly so.'

"'Would you mind calling one of them over here so that I might talk with him a moment?'

"I looked sharply at him then, but he looked the part so perfectly that I immediately replied that I thought it would do no harm for me to grant his request.

"He nodded his head brightly, and said: 'We are out of hearing of the others here, and really I would consider it a great favor if you would do so.'

"'Which one would you like to talk to?' I asked him then.

"'Oh, anyone will do,' he replied. 'You say that none of them is dangerous. There is one particularly intelligent-appearing man in the group—that fat one; would you mind asking him to step this way?'

"He had indicated Quartz, and I hesitated; but I had committed myself and I thought there was no danger so long as I was there, so I called him.

"Quartz came at once, evidently pleased because he had been called.

"I said to Quartz, without calling him by name or number: 'This gentleman is a clergyman and he wishes to talk to you. I hope you will be civil and courteous to him.'

"Quartz gazed at me for a full half minute before he replied, and it seemed to me that he was on the point of refusing to say a word; but then he turned and faced the minister, and in that cold-blooded way of his, which I never heard from anybody else, he said to him:

"'I haven't much use for men of your cloth, sir. If I had had, I might not now be here. If it is your wish to preach to me, I tell you frankly that you will waste your effort. But since I am ordered to do so, I will listen to what you have to say and reply as I see fit, probably by telling you lies.'

"The minister seemed shocked at that, but he began at once to talk to Quartz about the great sin of lying. Quartz replied in monosyllables, always courteously, but with unmistakable irony. The minister did most of the talking, and I hope you will not ask me to repeat all that, for I couldn't do it. He launched into a perfect sermon before long, and Quartz listened to it all with perfect attention.

"I got tired of it after a while and half turned my back, remaining, however, so that I could all the time keep one eye on my prisoner; and it was then, Mr. Carter, or very soon after that, when the thing happened."

"When what thing happened?"

"When Quartz vanished."

"What! Quartz and the other man as well? And right there before your eyes, with the other prisoners and the other guards looking on?"

"Yes, sir. That was when and how it happened. Quartz vanished and the other man, also. I did not see either of them go, nor did any of the other men. It seems incredible, but if you will listen with patience it won't take me long to tell you the rest.

CHAPTER IV.

A FAMOUS TRICK OF INDIA MAGIC.

Price leaned forward toward the detective as he ceased speaking, and, touching the top of his own head with the tips of his fingers, he said:

"If you will take the trouble to feel there, Mr. Carter, you will discover the only mark I bear of the occasion, and the bump you will find, which is almost as big as an egg, will explain why I saw nothing, although it does not explain what made the others, who were four or five rods away from us, blind to what occurred during the next five minutes."

"Five minutes!" exclaimed the detective. "So long as that?"

"Yes, sir. It was five minutes before the mist blew away, and they found me stretched on the ground unconscious, and the prisoner and the minister gone."

"Tell me what happened as nearly as you know about it, for I believe you to be an honest man, Price, who would not willingly let a prisoner escape. After that, tell me what the others saw or failed to see."

"What happened to me, was this," began Price, bowing thanking the detective for his faith in him. "I stood in the position I have already explained to you. I was listening to their talk without listening to their words. That is, I was all attention to hear anything which might be said not in accordance with the rules of the prison, but the stuff that fellow was talking went through one ear and out at the other, unheeded."

"I can understand that. Go on."

"As we stood there, we formed a triangle: that is, Quartz was partly in front of me, and beyond him were the other prisoners and guards; at my left was the minister."

"I understand."

"I could look past Quartz and see the other prisoners still seated under the trees, very plainly, but suddenly as I looked, they faded completely from my view, exactly as if a heavy mist had fallen from the sky as a fog will sometimes drop down. In fact, I believed it to be a fog—I could not now call it anything else from my own experience—and I half turned to take Quartz away from the minister and back to the others, when I got this thump on the head."

The detective nodded his head and Price continued:

"It laid me out cold. I did not recover consciousness for a quarter of an hour, so I only know what occurred after that from what I was told by the other guards and the prisoners; and as they one and all tell the same story about it, it must be true."

"Doubtless it is. Let me hear it."

"Well, sir, the gist of it is that they saw the same thing I saw. It settled down between them and me, and seemed to drive toward them, for what little breeze there was—and there was very little at the time—was drifting that way.

"They could not see up the road at all. They could not see us. We were completely shut out, and the three guards on duty there did only what was their duty, under the circumstances."

"What was that?"

"They huddled their prisoners into a group and stood over them with their rifles ready so that none would consider the moment a good opportunity to make a break for liberty. They thought each minute that I would appear out of the mist."

"But you didn't appear."

"I should say not."

"For how long a time?"

"They all agree that it was about five minutes before they saw me lying in the road. It might have been a little more or a little less, for not one of them thought to look at the time."

"So, after about five minutes, as nearly as they can reckon, you were discovered?"

"Yes."

"And ten more, or fifteen minutes in all elapsed, before you recovered consciousness?"

"Yes."

"And when you were discovered, the other two, that is, Quartz and the minister, had vanished?"

"That is the exact truth."

"During the ten minutes before you recovered, was anything done to overtake them?"

"Two of the guards ran up the road some distance, but found no trace of them at all. It was impossible that they should go far, for there was then only one guard left with the other prisoners. You must remember that I was unconscious and that they believed me to be dead. They found no trace of them."

"And then?"

"It was their plain duty to get me back to the prison

as soon as possible, and to report the loss of our prisoner."

"Were your prisoners ironed?"

"Yes; that is, each of them wore an anklet on each leg with a small chain between the two irons."

"They were not fastened together at all?"

"No."

"Were their hands fastened in any way?"

"No, sir."

"Was Quartz ironed the same as the others?"

"Certainly."

"And did they all wear the prison uniform?"

"Yes, sir."

"Was there a crossroad near where you were resting under the trees when Crystal—for I am sure it was he—appeared?"

"There was."

"How far away, and in what direction from where you were resting?"

"Six or eight rods to the east—that is to say, that Quartz talked with the minister about halfway between where the men were resting and the crossroad."

"I thought it must be so. Did it occur to nobody to go to that road and look there for evidence that a horse or horses had been standing there."

"Yes, sir, I did," replied Price; "at daylight this morning."

"Good. What did you find there?"

"I found the marks of wheels, and proof that two horses had been drawn up at the side of the road and had evidently stood there for a long time, as if waiting for somebody or something. I could tell that by the droppings of the horses and by the marks made by the wheels in the soft earth where the impatient animals had moved a little forward and back, in their uneasiness."

"Very good. Now, could you tell by the wheels what sort of a carriage it was?"

"Yes, sir."

"How? What sort was it?"

"The forward wheels were considerably nearer together than the rear ones. The carriage was therefore a coupé drawn by two horses, and, of course, there was a driver on the box to hold them; but in this case there were two men on the box, and one chewed while the other smoked a pipe during that wait."

"You should have been a detective instead of a prison guard, Price. Was that all you discovered?"

"Yes; I had only a moment. I had been told to come to you this morning, and I had that little time between daylight and catching my train. I thought you would ask just such questions, and I wished to be in a position to answer them as well as possible."

"You did very well."

"I did another thing also, sir."

"What was that?"

"I was so sure that I would find something there, and so sure that you would wish to see it if I did, that I took a man along with me and told him to stand guard over the spot until I called him off if it took a week."

"That was not a bad idea; still I hardly think we shall care to examine the ground more than you have done. We may, however. I'll see about that later."

"Yes, sir."

"The one important thing about your discovery is that it tells us exactly how your prisoner escaped."

"How is that, Mr. Carter?"

"Why, it tells us, first, that they were aware of the exact time you were likely to pass that crossroad, and, therefore, that they knew the route you would take."

"That was easy, sir, for we invariably take the same route. We have done so all the spring, because the roads are drier that way and because those roads are less frequented."

"Exactly. And you also start at about the same hour each time, do you not?"

"Always."

"Secondly, it tells us that it was known to Crystal that Dr. Quartz was in the habit of going with you on certain days."

"But that was not the case at all, Mr. Carter."

"No? What was the situation?"

"Quartz was finicky about going. If the day was not pleasant, or——"

"Or if it happened to be a little windy when the time came to start, he begged off till the next day: was that it?"

"Precisely."

"Very well, that only strengthens the theory I had in mind when I said that I could tell you how your prisoner escaped."

"I wish you would tell me how it was, sir."

"I will tell you, Price, if you will listen attentively."

"I'll be only too glad to do that."

"We are dealing with people who are as familiar with East India magic, as you are with the corridors and galleries of your prison—and, by the way, Price, your old acquaintance, Zanoni, has escaped by the use of one of those tricks. Hush! Let me continue. There is a certain class of mountaineer fakirs far in the interior of India who have the power, or claim to have it, of invisibility. They do the trick inside large buildings, with ease, but in the open air they require a perfectly still day; that is, there must be no air stirring. It is performed by flinging a certain powder, called Sindhar-Scutti, into the air. The moment the powder is freed, it flies into the form of a mist, blinding the eyes to everything beyond it, after which it gradually settles and is so fine that it disappears. The least breath disturbs it. I know the trick. I have seen it often. I could do it easily myself if only I could obtain some Sindhar-Scutti."

CHAPTER V.

A CLEW WORTH GOING AFTER.

Nick Carter strode across the room to the windo and stood with his hands in his pockets, looking out nothing in particular, for a long time.

This was a favorite attitude of his when he was sol ing a deep problem, or when he was at a loss in wh direction to give his first attention.

Presently he turned again to the prison guard.

"Price," he said, "I think I will go with you at onc to that corner where the two-horse coupé stood whi you were taking your rest with the prisoners."

"I would be glad to take you there, if you will go, replied Price.

"It may be the easiest and the quickest way of get ting on the track of all three of the persons I desire to find just now."

"It seems so to me, sir."

Nick seemed not to hear him, but continued as i talking to himself:

"Zanoni has disappeared into thin air, as it were; Crystal has not yet appeared at all in a place or at a time from which any trace of him can be secured; but here is something tangible, in the fact of the presence of that coupé."

"There certainly is."

"It must have stood there a long time——"

"More than an hour I should say, from the appearance of the spot where it waited."

"Good. The longer it remained there, the better. Somebody should have noticed it, and therefore have seen the men who were on the box. You say those roads are unfrequented?"

"Rather so. Still, there are many people passing that way, and on the road we have referred to as the crossroad in particular. The two roads are simply much less used than the others of that neighborhood."

"Tell me: before you saw Crystal approaching you, you see or hear anything of the coupé?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"There is a ruin of an old-time cooper shop on that corner. The coupé stood behind it."

"Are there any other buildings on those corners?"

"Not one."

"Or near there, where you rested?"

"Not on the road I was following, but on the other there are a few."

"What are they and how near to that corner are they? Tell me about them, beginning at the nearest."

"The first one is an old barn, which was once part of like an estate. It has fallen into ruin, however. The house and the other buildings have disappeared and the old barn, or what remains of it, is all that is left of the old place."

"You speak as if somebody lived in that old barn."

"There does."

"Who—but, first, how far is it from the corner we are speaking of?"

"Not more than a dozen rods along the road, and about a hundred feet back from it."

"Now, who lives there?"

"A strange old character, half hermit and half crazy, they say. I have seen him, but I have never talked with him. He has a hobby for collecting strange stones, flints and such things. I have heard that his old tumbledown place is filled with them."

"Ha!" said Nick, and went into deep thought again.

"I know," continued Price, "that he starts out every morning with a bag, and comes home at night with it so heavy that he can hardly carry it."

"Good!" said Nick. "Let us hope that he has found a quartz and a crystal among his specimens. What is his name?"

"Malgar."

"His first name?"

"Norbert—Norbert Malgar. He is a descendant of one of the old and now almost extinct families of that region. He claims to have inherited that old place, and, anyhow, he pays the taxes on it every year. They don't amount to much now."

"How does he live?"

"Nobody knows."

"Does he appear to have money?"

"Only when he pays the taxes. He never buys anything at the stores of the neighborhood, unless it is a little soda, half a dozen eggs, or half a pound of coffee—something like that."

"How old is he?"

"People say he is ninety or past; I should say he is much less."

"Humph! On second thought, Price, I think I will ask you to let me go there alone."

"Just as you say, Mr. Carter."

"I shouldn't wonder if old Norbert Malgar might prove to be an interesting character. How long have you known about him, Price?"

"Seven or eight years altogether."

"Has he always been the same as you know him now?"

"Always."

"Do you happen to know where he goes when he collects those stones?"

"Just around the country there. Up on the hills or mountains, of course. Nobody knows where he goes."

"He keeps that a secret, eh?"

"Yes; he is very jealous of it. He claims that he has found sapphires and other precious stones."

"Does he ever show his collection?"

"Oh, yes, indeed, for a fee."

"How much is that?"

"I think he charges a quarter."

"Have you ever seen the collection yourself?"

"Yes; I went in there one day, but more to see how he lived than to view his collection."

"What did you think about it?"

"Just what I have already told you."

"You regard him as a genuine character, then?"

"It has never occurred to me to think of him in any other light."

"What did you think of his collection?"

"I am not an expert, and, therefore, I can't express an opinion about that."

"Did you think it as genuine as you supposed the man to be?"

"Yes; I suppose so. It really only made me regard him as crazier than ever."

"Exactly. Now, if you will take that pencil and this pad of paper and make me a rough draft of that region, giving me the roads so that I will have no difficulty in finding this spot, I will appreciate it; and while you are at it, I will step into my private office and use the telephone."

At the telephone in his study, the detective asked for a number which is not down on the directory of telephones; but he was soon connected with a little office in the downtown section of the city much frequented by members of the staff of the United States Government Secret Service.

"This is Nick Carter," he said, when he had secured the connection; and he repeated a form of sentence which was used as a password between them so that there would be no mistake.

Being himself satisfied that he had the right man at the other end of the wire—for government affairs are performed very secretly and with great caution—he added:

"You remember, of course, what you told me about that small counterfeiting affair you have had on hand so long, the other day? I refer to the one which you said did not amount to much, but which had puzzl... your entire department for years."

"Oh, yes," came the reply. "Certainly. Wh... of it?"

"I think that one of those happy accidents, whi... sometimes occur in our profession, has dropped me ... line of putting you onto the secret of it."

"I'm sure I hope so," came the next reply. "... never amounts to much, in dollars and cents, but the... coins keep turning up all the time in all sorts of place... mostly in that neighborhood."

"Did you ever investigate an old man up there b... the name of Malgar?"

"Sure. Several times."

"And nothing came of it, eh?"

"Not a thing. He's just crazy, that's all."

"Well, it may be that I am wrong, but I'll find out. I'm going up to call on the old fellow on another matter, but from what I have heard about him, I am inclined to think that he is your man."

"You're wrong, Nick; dead wrong; but all the same it won't do any harm to look into it if you have an idea that way."

"What do you know about him? Anything which will help me in getting next?"

"Not a thing. He's an old crank. He won't care whether you represent the government, or a church, or are dressed as a tramp, he'll treat you just the same, which is just as if nobody but himself had any right to be on the earth."

"That's a good pointer of itself. I'll try him, anyhow, and I think I'll find your man."

"I hope so. I hope so."

That closed the conversation, and Nick hung up the phone.

When he returned to the constitution room, Price had completed the map, which was very complete and thorough.

"I've changed my mind, Price," said Nick. "I think I'll take you with me after all, but I may as well reserve this map for reference. I did think I would go alone; then I thought I would take one of my assistants, but they are all busy just now, and, as I need somebody, I will take you. Can you remain away from the prison to-morrow?"

"I've got to stay away for thirty days."

"Oh, I see," said Nick, laughing. "Suspended you, eh?" Well, I don't blame the warden, do you? I think I should have suspended you myself if I had been in his place—and I am glad he did do it, for now I can make good use of you. Come up to my room, and I'll rig you up as I wish you to appear. Then we will start; and, Price, I begin to think that we'll find something worth going after."

CHAPTER VI.

THE LONG END OF A CLEW.

The reader will readily see why Nick Carter did not care to hear any more about the buildings along the old road where the two-horse coupé had awaited the rescue of Dr. Quartz, and why he saw the possibilities in the old man, Norbert Malgar.

It had struck him at once, as soon as Price mentioned the proximity of the old barn and described its eccentric occupant, that without a doubt he was an accomplice in the act of rescue, for that accomplices were required, in order to carry out the plan adopted, was immediately evident.

Furthermore, where could Crystal have secured the valuable information he possessed regarding the movements of the guards and prisoners, if not from some resident of the neighborhood who was not only observant, but who also was sufficiently loose in his morals to be easily subsidized and induced thereby to lend assistance to the deed?

But when, on top of all this came the information about the hobby of the old man, whose life seemed to be given over to the gathering of odd stones along the wayside and among the mountains, the detective at once recalled a conversation he had had with a representative of the United States Secret Service concerning that very neighborhood and its mystery.

The mystery was a simple one and not of particular moment, save for the one principle that the laws of the United States, regarding counterfeit money, were being transgressed.

The amount of the transgression was small indeed; so small, in fact, that only from time to time had the attention of the authorities been called to it.

It consisted of the fact that some person or persons in that neighborhood had been for years manufacturing counterfeit coin which had almost defied detection, but which, nevertheless, had never been coined at one of the United States mints.

Nick Carter had never been called upon the case. It had merely been related to him as one of the incidents of a conversation.

But the story of the old crank who collected curious stones along the mountain side; who passed his days among the mountains at this occupation; who paid his taxes regularly, but who in other respects appeared to be a pauper brought the conversation to mind, and he immediately decided in his own mind that in that old barn and in the secret visits of the crank to the mountains with his bag dwelt the explanation of the mystery.

Moreover, one circumstance would suggest the other.

An old man, the descendant of a good family, who had become so far depraved that he made his living by defrauding his government, would readily lend himself to such a scheme as the one which had resulted in the escape of Quartz—and, likewise, one who would lend himself to such a crime as that, would not hesi-

tate to manufacture and occasionally pass counterfeit money.

Nick Carter cared nothing about the government case save on general principles; but he stood ready to follow it to the end if, in pursuing it, he might be led to the solution of his own problem.

The detective accompanied by the faithful Price arrived in the vicinity of the old barn soon after the break of day in order to be on hand when the old man issued from his strange domicile on his strange errand.

If you could have seen Nick Carter then, you would have supposed him to be a professor from some college who had selected his own methods for the enjoyment of a short vacation from his duties and who was accompanied on the expedition by one of his pupils.

In short, Nick represented perfectly a professor of geology.

He wore a double visored cap, huge glasses covered his eyes, locks of hair rapidly turning gray fell almost to his shoulders, a velveteen coat, Knickerbocker breeches, leggings and wading shoes.

He carried a canvas bag slung over his shoulders. Attached to it was a moth net of unusual proportions, and a geologist's hammer completed his outfit.

Price's costume and outfit were the same with some slight modifications.

Thus arrayed and accoutered, the best friends of either would have passed them anywhere without recognition.

There was a huge bowlder near the roadside abutting upon the land of Malgar and almost at the point where the cage had stood while it awaited the arrival of Dr. Quartz and his rescuer; and when old Malgar issued forth with his empty bag slung over his back, Nick was on his knees hammering at the rock while Price stood expectantly near, watching him with close and rapt attention.

Neither of them paid the slightest attention to the old man when he approached.

They seemed neither to see nor to hear him; but [illegible] glanced curiously at them, half hesitated in his somewhat rapid walk, and then passed on.

"Never touched him," whispered Price, who was enjoying the time of his life in this detective work with the great detective.

"Hush!" replied Nick. "He will turn and come back here after a minute if we do not look toward him. The look he gave us as he approached proved that to my satisfaction."

But the old man went on his way without turning his head until he reached the corner.

There, however, he paused and looked back at them as Nick could see by the reflection in the glasses he wore.

He paused there a moment and then went on out of sight.

"We've got him now," said Nick. "Keep steadily at work, and I'll wager he'll be back here inside of five minutes."

And he was.

After a very few moments they saw him returning, this time with the determined step of a person who has a definite object in view.

But now as before, neither of the men at the rock seemed to see or to hear him until he addressed them in a sharp but gruff voice, when both started as if a bee had stung them, and precisely as if they had been totally unaware of his presence or proximity until the instant.

"What in blazes are you two doing there, with my property?" he demanded.

"I—I beg your pardon, sir, but I don't think I understood what you said. You startled me so, you know," said Nick.

"I asked you what in blazes you were doing there,

to th my property; that's what I said," replied the old
more gruffly than before.
but "Oh! Ah! Yes. To be sure. Quite so. Quite so,"
said Nick, vacantly. "Yes, yes, yes. Why, we were
rely testing this rock, don't you know. That is all."
o w "Well, that rock belongs to me, and you want to
worse it alone."

"But my dear, sir, how can it belong to you? It lies
con the side of the road, on the highway," expostulated
wark, precisely as if that particular rock was the only
ovelng in all the world in which he felt the slightest in-
rest.

nin "I own to the middle of the road. That's the way
deed reads. The rock is mine, and I want you
new leave it alone," said the old man, angrily.

Nick Carter heaved a deep sigh, which seemed to
me from the bottom of his heart.

Then he turned to Price as if forgetful of the pres-
ce of the old man, and remarked in a low mono-
ne:

"How unfortunate! And I thought we were quite
ar a great discovery." Then to the old man, he
id:

"Very good, sir. We will not disturb your property
you feel that way about it."

He picked up his hammer and his bag, and started
as if to move away, when the old man addressed him
ain.

"I'd like to know what you expected to discover in
at rock," he said, harshly.

"You have hardly taken the proper course to secure
urtesy from me, sir," replied the detective, mildly,
nd yet I have no objections to telling you, if you are
terested in such things."

"Perhaps I am. Anyhow, I'd like to know."

"We have every reason to believe that we were on
the verge of discovering one of those rare impressions
the species formicae, that is all," said Nick, calmly.

The old man looked puzzled, and Nick at once launched into a voluble explanation of the meaning of the term, defining it with all the cunning of his profession and using so many impossible terms and phrases that the man before him became utterly lost—as, indeed, anybody might have been.

"So you see, sir," continued the detective, at the end of his dissertation, "we were really doing no harm whatever. We would not have injured the rock, and we should have carried only a few small specimens away with us; while, on the other hand, if my supposition is correct, the discovery would ultimately prove of great value to you, if this land adjoining indeed belongs to you."

"How would your discovery be of value to me?"

"Why, don't you know that it proves the location of gold? Gold in its virgin state, in a dust, deposited in small pockets each one of which might carry anywhere from five to thirty thousand dollars? And there might be a hundred or five hundred pockets on your land alone. Yes, sir."

"What did you propose to do with it if you found it?" demanded the old man, dazed by the information.

"Do with it? Nothing at all save to discover it. It is on your land. It belongs to you; and, besides, such things have no value whatever to me save the pleasure of discovering them when I am so fortunate."

Malgar was interested and Nick knew that he had won the battle.

The old man hesitated a long time, but at last he fell.

"Well," he said, "if you think there is anything in it and will promise to wait here till I return tonight, about sundown, you may go on with it. What do you say?"

"Oh, yes, yes, yes!" replied Nick, eagerly. "We will wait till to-morrow morning if necessary."

"Just till about sundown. Mind you do it," said the

old man, gruffly. "I want to have the first talk with you after you have finished."

"Do you live near here?" asked Nick.

"Never you mind where I live. I'll show you when I return."

"Very good, sir, very good."

Malgar turned without another word and went on his way, this time keeping straight along the road instead of turning the corner; and they watched him, still apparently intent upon their work, until he disappeared.

But even then, for a long time—almost an hour—they never once ceased their seeming toil; but at last Nick threw aside his hammer.

"I think that now we may begin the real work," he said.

CHAPTER VII.

THE HANGMAN'S NOOSE.

"That old man is a shrewd old chap, and is, I suspect, a fraud," said Nick, when he and Price had reached a point well behind the old barn and were ensconsed among some trees which screened them from the road. "He is younger than he appears to be, and than he would have others suppose him to be."

"He evidently had no fear that we would attempt to enter his house in his absence," remarked Price.

"That very fact should make us extra cautious," replied Nick. "We must enter it by some unusual method—by some means which he would not suspect a person of attempting, for it is certain that he is sharp enough to have a method of telling if any person has approached his house during his absence."

"He may have a death fall, or a set gun, or some such contrivance to meet unwelcome visitors."

"I have not a doubt of it; and he will return at least an hour and perhaps two or three hours before he said he would. You can bet on that, Price."

"How do you propose to get inside, then?"

"I haven't decided yet. I will in a moment."

"You intend, of course, to await his return."

"I should say I did; and I don't want him to suspect that we have been any nearer this place than we were when he talked with us."

The building before them was the ruin of a once stately barn—part of a princely estate.

One end of it had fallen into utter decay, and was, in fact, nothing more than a heap of rubbish, stones, fallen timbers, rotting shingles and refuse.

The other end, the one nearest them, was comparatively in fair condition.

A dingy window covered with cobwebs and a huge double door confronted them. The only sign of habitation which the place presented at all was a stovepipe which protruded from a hole near the window and thence extended upward to a level with the peak of the roof.

"There is only one way to do the thing at all," said the detective, presently, after studying the situation, "and that is to enter through the floor. Have you got sand enough to crawl on your belly and to follow me under the scum of that old ruin, Price?"

"I'll follow you anywhere you lead, Mr. Carter."

"All right. Come on."

"Won't he have that way guarded?"

"Probably; but not in the way we shall do it, I think."

They passed around through the trees to the other end of the barn, and, in doing so, came upon a broken spade which Nick seized upon.

"Just the thing," he said. "You will have to make a piece of board do for a shovel, and we will have to dig."

"But digging will leave evidences behind, will it not?"

"Surely; unless we cover them up."

They returned from the end to the side of the ruined of the barn again, and at last discovered a place wo far from the good part of the building—if any of it could be called good—where they were ened by bushes.

There they began their work, Nick with the old e and Price with his board shovel.

It did not take them long to break through the rubbling foundation and they presently found themves beneath the mass of wreckage.

"Nice place this, in which to bury a man," said Nick. Follow me carefully now, because if you happen to ave anything without first testing it, you are likely bring the whole thing down on our heads."

"And that would mean good-by, wouldn't it?"

"Very likely."

It is unnecessary here to relate all their experiences ring that journey under the ruin, more than to say at frequently they were compelled to dig their way ver a timber, or to crawl on a still more precarious ting over a mass of débris which was likely at any ment to fall and bury them.

But at last, after unceasing labor, they found themves under that part of the edifice in which the old an lived, and knew that the secrets they wished to restigate, if secrets there were at all, were directly er their heads.

"Now comes the delicate part of our task—the really ficult part," said Nick.

He had provided himself for the expedition thorughly, and in his pockets were his electric search-, and that little case of wonderful tools, not larger a surgeon's instruments, but so strong and keen that ey were as efficient as the strongest and best tools er are made.

A full hour was employed in removing the fastenngs of a single board, but that single board was enough sufficient for their purposes, and having dragged in some rubbish from the ruin, Nick succeeded in manufacturing a lever with which he raised one end of the board just far enough from its resting place so that he knew nothing over it would be disturbed, but so he could see into the room.

"All right," he called down to Price, who waited below him. "Bear on your lever a trifle more. Then when you have got it right, put the brace across it to hold it and follow me. It is always better for two people to see things than for one."

Two minutes later they were in the strange, barn like room.

They discovered almost at once that it was well they had not attempted an entrance by any of the usual methods of gaining admittance to such a place.

At the solitary window, two loaded guns were so arranged that the slightest movement of the sash would have sent a double charge of shot straight into the body of any person who attempted entrance by that method, and at the door a heavy iron bar was arranged on pulleys so that it would be released the instant any person should open the door; and it would surely have fallen upon the head of that individual and crushed it.

But there was still another pitfall for the unwary, which was so ingenious and so perfectly arranged, that Nick looked in wonder upon it.

He had seen it when he first looked into the room through the hole made by the raised board in the floor, but it was not until they had been in the place several moments that Price's eyes lighted upon it.

"What in the world is that?" he asked, pointing at a line which dangled from the roof near one corner of the room, extended to the floor and there seemed to part and to pass entirely around the floor until it covered the entire space of the room.

"Be careful," said Nick, seizing his arm and holding him as he was about to start forward. (The two had remained on the spot where they entered, that is,

at the far or inner end of the room, while they were making their first cursory examination. Nick had done this in order to avoid the possibility of walking into a trap inside the room.)

"Stay where you are," he said to Price. "This is not the first time I have seen a contrivance of this kind, and, fortunately, I know the secret of it."

He crossed the room on tiptoe, carefully avoiding touching the articles it contained as he passed, until he reached the corner at which the rope was dangling, and there he discovered, as he was sure he would, a clockwork mechanism concealed in a small cupboard.

Inside that there was a small lever which he moved, and then he turned again to his companion.

"Now you may come forward, all right," he said, "only please do not touch a thing in the room without my permission."

"But what is the thing?" asked Price again.

"You, who have worked in prisons all your life, surely ought to know it by name, although I see no reason why you should recognize this particular trap," replied Nick. "Go over to the corner where the rope descends and look at that part of it which touches the floor. Then tell me what you see."

Price obeyed; then, suddenly, he uttered a sharp exclamation.

"Great Scott!" he said. "This thing is a hangman's knot."

"Exactly," replied Nick, "and this whole contrivance is a man trap which is known in some parts of the Southwest as the Hangman's Noose. It was invented, I believe, by a Texas ranger, named Grace."

"But what does it do?"

"It catches and hangs, sometimes by the neck but more often by the feet, any person who comes in contact with an article it is intended to protect."

"But how?"

"This was invented before the uses to which electricity can be put were discovered. Connected with each article it is intended to protect, and they are doubtless very few in this place, is a delicate wire we must be careful to disturb none of them, as we move around the place. That wire connects with the clock work over in that corner, and that clockwork in its turn releases a huge weight which works the noose."

"And it catches the man, eh?"

"It works like lightning. It rarely fails to catch its victim."

Nick passed rapidly from one part of the room to another until he had traversed the entire surface of the floor, walking on tiptoe as he did so, and searching with his light every inch of the ground he covered.

Occasionally, while he worked, he pointed significantly at some object or other, and Price nodded in return that he understood.

"You will notice," he said, when he returned to the prison guard's side, "that the noose, as it passes around the room, never goes behind an object which would impede its working powers; also that really only three objects in the room are connected with the clockwork."

"Yes; you pointed all that out to me."

"Those three objects are, the little iron safe, the cabinet where the old man is supposed to keep his curios, and that coffin-like box yonder. Hence, those are the only objects with which we will bother ourselves just now. We know what the cabinet contains, and, therefore, that old Malgar has placed his noose in connection with that merely as a precaution, suspecting that the first person who entered would go there."

"And the safe?"

"I can guess what that contains. It is probably crammed full of counterfeit silver coin. I may be wrong, of course, but I would be willing to bet that I am right."

"And the box? It is big enough to hold the body of a man."

"I hardly think we will find such a thing as that in the box, but still, who knows? At all events we will give our first attention to that. But first, Price, go to those peep holes in the door, which I see the old man has arranged there, and tell me if you see anything."

"Not a thing," replied Price, after a moment spent in examination of the approach to the barn.

Still Nick was not satisfied.

He could see that considerable time must be employed in opening the box in such a way that Malgar would not know that it had been tampered with, and he rose from his knees beside it and went to the peep holes himself.

Nothing, however, was to be seen.

He had an uninterrupted view all the way to the main road, and there was not a sign of a human being in sight, so he returned again to the box.

Presently he began upon it, removing the screws with great care, one by one, and placing them on the floor where there could be no mistake in fitting each one into its correct spot later, when he should close the box again.

At last all was in readiness to raise the lid, and he threw the light into Price's hand, for, although it was broad daylight outside, the interior of that dingy room was quite dark.

Then he raised the lid—and, as he did so, even he started back with an exclamation of surprise, for stretched there, apparently dead, although exceedingly alive, was what appeared to be the very man with whom they had talked, out on the road beside the rock.

"It's old Malgar himself!" said Price, in a hoarse whisper.

"I think so, too," said Nick, beginning rapidly to replace the cover on the box.

"Then who——" began Price, but he got no further, for at that instant steps were heard outside the door, a gentle tapping came against it.

With a bound, although a silent one, Nick Carter crossed the floor and applied his eye to one of the peep holes.

Standing almost directly in front of him, and within touch, if it had not been for the door which intervened, was Dr. Crystal.

CHAPTER VIII.

A SURPRISE FOR DR. QUARTZ.

For almost the first time in his life, Nick Carter was in doubt what to do.

He felt perfectly assured that Dr. Crystal had no idea that he was there, inside the old barn at which he was demanding admittance in such an assured manner, and, therefore, Nick knew that he could open the door, leap out on the man, and capture him before he could hope to escape.

But on the other hand, to do such a thing was to betray himself, and he did not wish to do that.

There was other and larger game which he desired to get.

He wanted Quartz and he wanted Zanoni.

It is true that he also wanted Crystal; but, beside the others, Crystal sank almost to insignificance, notwithstanding that he had already proved himself such an adept in the very same arts as Dr. Quartz practiced.

The presence of the body of the old man in the box proved to Nick beyond the peradventure of a doubt that it was Quartz who had accosted him while he was at work on the rock outside, and he was angry with himself to think that he had permitted the doctor to fool him.

But there was an excuse for that.

The detective had been so occupied in playing his own part, and so utterly unsuspicious of the immediate proximity of the wily doctor, that—well, he had

not taken the notice of the man which he would have done under almost any other circumstances.

While Nick was pondering what to do, not more than two or three seconds elapsed.

He turned then, with the suddenness which was so natural with him.

"Stay where you are," he whispered. "But be prepared to put up a fight at any moment."

"I'm ready now."

"We have crawled into a mare's nest. I'm going out to capture that fellow if I can, but he may be gone before I get there."

"Who is it? Not Quartz?"

"No. It's Crystal."

"All right."

"Get to the peep hole and watch. If you see Quartz approaching, skip down through the hole in the floor, close down the board and follow me."

"What about the box? You haven't fastened that yet."

"Leave it as it is until I return."

He disappeared through the floor at that instant and made his way as rapidly as possible along the treacherous way by which they had gained admittance to the house.

"If Quartz fooled me," he thought, "I think I also fooled him. That is one consolation. It is funny I did not notice his eyes. He has found some new way of concealing their expression, I suppose."

Having been over the ground once, it did not take the detective so long to get out as it had required to get in; and yet all of a quarter of an hour had elapsed before he cautiously rounded the corner of the barn and peered at the spot where Crystal had stood.

But Crystal was no longer there.

Nick made his way rapidly to the road and looked up and down along that thoroughfare, but Dr. Crystal was nowhere in sight.

He hurried down to the corner of the roads and looked from there in all four ways, but there was no sign of Crystal, nor of any other human being, save for a few so far in the distance as not to be considered.

He longed to make a further search; to investig many places where the man might be momentarily den, but his anxiety to get back into the barn was greater, and so he hurried back again to the hole the ruin, and thence through the passageway they cut.

"Which way did he go?" he demanded of Price, instant he was in the room.

"Blessed if I know. He just passed out of sight the peep hole. I ran to the others, but a peep hole a small thing, and I couldn't get another glimpse him."

"He isn't very far off at this moment," said Ni "Finding nobody here, he has gone to some conveni hiding place to await their return. I only hope Zanoni will be with Quartz when he arrives."

"Do you think she will be?"

"More than likely."

"What shall you do?"

"Stay here and fight it out."

"Isn't it rather big odds?"

"If you are afraid, Price, you may go at any tim

"You wrong me there, Mr. Carter. I was o thinking of you."

"I did that, Price; pardon me," said Nick, extend his hand. "I know that you are not afraid, an haven't a doubt in the world that you utterly for yourself when you made that remark."

"It is true. I did."

Nick pondered a moment, and then suddenly he sa

"Help me here a moment with this box."

"What are you going to do?"

"Arrange a little surprise for Quartz when he turns. But first we must see if this old man is re dead. He looked so lifelike in that rear glance I of him that I am not certain."

The cover was quickly removed a second time this time cast aside unceremoniously.

The old man was quickly taken from the box placed upon the floor, and it was quickly apparent he was indeed dead.

A long, slender, needle-like dagger had been jab

the back of his neck, severing the spinal column, the wound was such that he had scarcely bled at all.

"Poor old chap," said Nick. "I wonder if he was as bad as I thought him."

"There's not a doubt of it," replied Price.

"I'm going to find out before I go ahead with the thing's joke I was about to prepare, anyhow."

"What was that?"

"You shall see presently."

"What are you going to do now, sir?"

"Find out if this old man was really a criminal."

"How?"

"By opening this safe and that cabinet. We will find something in each of them, I have no doubt."

"The safe was locked."

"I have already found the key. It was hidden in the side cupboard where the clockwork is concealed."

The safe was open in another instant and there, as Nick had predicted, was deposited many small canvas bags, each filled as full as it would hold.

Some of them contained half dollars, others quarters, still others dimes; there were no dollars.

"The old man dealt in nothing so large as a dollar, I suppose," said Nick.

"I have heard it said that a dollar was never seen in his possession save when he went to pay his taxes," replied Price.

"These are very good counterfeits, but they are not the real thing. We don't have to look any further, now, for what I wanted."

"Shall I take a peek into the cabinet?"

"Yes; and tell me what you find."

Price opened the cabinet, which was not locked, and found merely a heap of stones, such as the old man had been in the habit of gathering.

But there was also there a tightly locked wooden box on the lower shelf.

This was locked, but Nick pried off the lid, and disclosed, as he had expected, an entire outfit in miniature, for making the counterfeits he had discovered.

"That settles it," he said. "I have no more compunctions about what I was going to do."

"What are you going to do?" asked Price again.

"I am going to show you the correct working of this trap, known as the hangman's noose."

"With the old man for a model?"

"Just that. Look out now. Stand aside and get down on the floor, for there is no telling what the thing will do. I am going to set this clockwork and then spring it."

Nick crossed to the little cupboard again and adjusted the lever, while Price crouched on the floor in a far corner of the room.

The detective had placed the body of the old man in a chair close against the safe, and so that the head leaned forward a little.

"Keep down now, Price," he said. Then he touched the spring.

They could feel the building tremble by the falling of some heavy weight somewhere beneath it, but evidently outside—that is, removed from the foundations.

At the same instant there was a whirring noise in the room. Two chairs within it were hurled across it as if thrown by human hands, and the one in which the body of the old man had been poised was thrown violently against Price, at the other side of the room.

The noose, arranged with perfect mechanical ability, seized the body and tore it from the chair. Then it slipped on upward until it touched his chin, and then, as if it were a thinking thing, it closed tightly around his neck and carried him with terrific force into the air.

The body flew upward nearly to the peak, and then fell back again to the end of the rope with a jerk which must surely have broken the neck of any living thing it might have caught.

And there it hung, swinging, a ghastly object, halfway between the floor and the peak of the roof.

"There," said Nick, coolly, "you see what had happened to one of us, had we not taken unusual precautions when we entered here."

"Great Heaven!" said Price. "What a horrible thing!"

"Yes, it is horrible; but not half so bad as some of the things performed by Quartz and Crystal. But their time is almost run, I hope and think. And now come. We will go outside. I am going to wait there in the character of the geologist for the return of Quartz; and then you and I have got to follow him in here when he invites us, and capture him."

CHAPTER IX.

THE RETURN OF DR. CRYSTAL.

When the two emerged from the hole they had dug in the foundation of the old barn, they no longer regarded it as a necessity to cover up their tracks, and, having entered among the bushes and dusted their clothing, restoring their former appearance as nearly as it was possible to do, the detective peered out cautiously in the direction of the roadway.

"I see nothing, and nobody," he said. "All the same, I think we will be a little cautious. You know this region thoroughly, I suppose."

"Perfectly."

"Then you lead the way."

"Where do you wish to go?"

"I want to strike either one of those two roads, as far away from this spot as possible, and, after that, to make our way back to the rock, slowly."

"I understand."

"We will stop and examine a specimen here and there as we go, after we get on the road, of course. Do you savvy, as they say in California?"

"You bet."

"Then lead the way. You are chief for a few minutes; only don't lose too much time and go too far. Half a mile will do, I think."

"I can take you out on the very spot where Quartz escaped, if you wish, only that is quite near."

"Take me beyond it so that we will come back past it. I would like to see it."

"I can do that, too."

"Good. You know now how Quartz escaped, don't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You understand now how he succeeded in getting out of the way so quickly, don't you?"

"Not quite."

"Why, Crystal murdered the old man and so prepared a hiding place, and—by thunder!"

"What's the matter?"

"Price, I know now why I did not recognize Quartz when we talked with the supposed old man?"

"Why was it?"

"Because it wasn't Quartz at all. It was Crystal."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure? Of course I am sure. Don't you see through the whole thing?"

"No; I will confess that I do not."

"It's as simple as the nose on your face, although that isn't as simple a matter as it might be. The man in the box hadn't been dead half a dozen hours had he?"

"I should say not, but I don't know."

"Well, you would have known had he been no longer dead."

"But I don't understand yet——"

"Crystal mooned around here until he bribed the old man into becoming his friend. Those fiends knew everything almost, and they might have spotted the counterfeiting scheme, and so frightened him into becoming their accomplice."

"I should think that was more likely."

"So should I. Well, we will say that he was frightened into helping them. He arranged to rescue Quartz after his escape and to thus give him an asylum where the others could knock off his irons and dress him up in a disguise, after which he was able to walk calmly away, probably directly past the prison door, for he likes to do such things."

"Yes, I see all that."

"Crystal remained behind for reasons of his own. He waited here till he heard from his friend, and then, fearing that the old man might betray them after he was gone, he killed him. See that?"

"Yes."

"After he had killed the old man, he suddenly

ided that it would not be a bad plan to use that make-up for a disguise for a time, and I'd bet a hat that this morning was the only time he has ever appeared in it, for it is not likely that Malgar would have consented to let him adopt it before. When he came out of the house, he encountered us. It is dead certain that he did not recognize me, and if it had been Quartz, he would have known me through any disguise, almost.

"He thought we were a pair of fools or escaped lunatics, and we thought him as bad; but after he left, he became suspicious."

"I see."

"He went to some convenient place and changed himself back to Dr. Crystal."

"Sure he did; and then he came back to see if we had been doing any monkeying around the place."

"That's the idea."

"Then when he comes again and invites us into his place, we'll only have one to fight, instead of three."

"Yes; and that's the disappointing part of it. It eliminates Quartz and Zanoni from this capture."

"Maybe not."

"I'm afraid it does."

"Maybe we can make him give up."

"We can try, at least. Ah! here is the road. Now work, for whatever he thinks, we must play our own parts so well that there will be no mistake."

"One question more."

"Well?"

"Do you suppose he will invite us into his place at all?"

"Certainly. He made up his mind then and there that we were detectives or something like it. He gave the idea of waiting for his return by inviting us into the house at that time. Now, he simply means to catch us in the hangman's noose."

"He can't very well do it now; the thing is already spoiled."

They were silent after that, both apparently deeply engaged in studying the stones along the roadside.

Nick merely glanced at the spot where Quartz had made his escape, when they passed it; and very soon after that they arrived at the corner, and presently at the old rock where they had encountered the supposed old man.

There was nobody in sight, and they seated themselves idly on the rock, Nick in the meantime adjusting those wonderful glasses of his so that he could see almost directly behind him, while at the same time, if you should stand in front of him and look at them, you could not have told that they were anything out of the ordinary.

It lacked fully two hours of sundown when they took their place on the rock; and they had waited something more than an hour, when Nick remarked, quietly:

"Don't look around yet, Price, but our man is coming."

"Where is he?"

"Back near the corner! I shouldn't wonder if he has been watching us for a considerable time, and is wondering why we are not at work."

"Perhaps he is onto us."

"Perhaps he is; and all the better if he is, if only he does not tumble to the fact that we are onto him. Here he comes. Sit still."

Neither turned until the sound of approaching footsteps came so near that they could no longer decline to hear it; and then Nick turned his head.

"Ah, my dear sir, you have returned at the appointed hour, or a little in advance of it," he said.

"Well, I said I'd be here, didn't I?" demanded the supposed old man, gruffly.

"I believe you did. Yes, in fact, I am sure you did."

"Well, what about that thing you were looking for—that discovery?"

"I am deeply grieved to inform you, my dear sir, that there is nothing in it."

"So you lied to me, did you?"

"No, sir, the rock merely deceived me."

"And it's all bosh about that gold, eh?"

Crystal was playing his part well and carrying it out in every detail.

"Ah, sir," said Nick, smiling, "I did not say that."

"That's what I understood you to say."

"I said there was nothing in this particular rock, but I have reason to believe that other rock can be found on your place which will prove the positiveness of my statement of this morning."

"Have you been looking around over there?" demanded the supposed old man, suddenly.

"By no means, my dear sir. You were so emphatic about your property this morning that I had not the hardihood to enter upon your land uninvited; but I have been looking elsewhere around the neighborhood, and what I have found will bear me out."

"Then you haven't been waiting here all the time, eh?"

"Oh, no. We gave this rock up about an hour or so after you went away. We only returned in order to keep the appointment."

"How long have you been waiting here now?"

"About two hours, I should say."

"And which way did you go when you left here?"

"About due west, I should say."

"Hasn't that friend of yours got a tongue?"

"He is my pupil. He never interferes in a scientific conversation."

"So you think there is gold on that property, do you?"

"I am sure of it; but of silver, I am positive—absolutely positive—silver so good that it is almost good enough to coin."

"Humph! Well, do you want to come inside and tell me about it? I haven't got much of a place to invite you to, as you can tell from the clothes I wear, but, such as it is, I'll make you welcome. I'm rather gruff in my way, and I offend most people, but I'll try to be as polite to you as possible."

"I should be delighted to be your guest, my dear sir."

"Then if you will have it so, come on. Just follow me. I live in a barn, but you won't mind that, I suppose."

"Not in the least. Not in the least."

CHAPTER X.

THE MAN IN THE HANGMAN'S NOOSE.

When the front of the barn was reached—that part of it where the doors through which the detective had peeped while he was inside the building—Crystal stepped around the corner of it for an instant, kicked a barrel to one side, seized a rope's end, which was in a hole underneath, and pulled sharply upon it.

Instantly, inside the door, there was a rumbling sound, which the detective had no doubt was caused by the iron bar dropping into some place of safety.

"I was chaining up my big dog," he explained, as he returned. "There are others inside, over near the window, but we can attend to those after we enter."

"All right," said Nick.

"But there is one thing I wish to explain before we enter. Those other dogs are trained to touch nobody who stands near a cabinet of selected stones I have got in there. Now, if both of you will step right over and place your hands on that cabinet till I get those dogs chained, they won't hurt you; but they will if you don't. You won't see the dogs, either, because I make them keep out of sight when I come in."

He had told them to step to the exact spot—or one of them—where the hangman's noose would have caught them both the instant they touched the cabin

But Nick had no fears of that noose now; he was only anxious to discover what impression it would make upon Crystal.

"Come ahead," said Crystal.

At the same instant he threw open the door and crossed the threshold rapidly—so rapidly, in fact, that he was halfway into the room before he discovered the horrible apparition which the detective had arranged for his greeting.

Then, as he started back with a half-suppressed cry—for once, at least, frightened—then as he half turned to face the foes whom he now instantly knew were behind him, Nick Carter leaped forward full upon him and bore him to the earth.

But Dr. Quartz's pupil, like the infamous doctor himself, was no weakling.

He managed, somehow, to wrench himself, for a

instant, free from the grasp of the detective, and in that instant to raise his hand and throw something from it.

It was some sort of liquid—Nick never knew what, nor he did not stop to consider.

He saw the motion of that raised arm, and leaped aside, but, at the same time, forward; and the next instant Dr. Crystal received a blow from Nick Carter's terrible fist, which put him effectually out of business.

When he struck the floor, he lay there like a stricken bullock, quivering in every nerve and sinew. His wig flew from his head, revealing at once the identity of the man, and he had no consciousness left in him.

"Put the irons on him, Price," said Nick, quietly. "We've got him, anyhow. You had best double up on the irons with him, too, for there is no telling what tricks he might try to play. After you have done that, I'll bring him together again, while I take down this poor, old creature here and return him to the box from which we took him. I wouldn't have treated him in that way for any less personage than Quartz, had I known about it."

It was almost an hour before consciousness returned to Crystal and he opened his eyes again; and, when he did so, it was to discover that he was seated in a chair which had been placed on a small table drawn up directly under the dangling noose, and that noose was already around his neck.

"Say your prayers, Crystal, if you know how, for I am going to hang you without mercy, in just five minutes," said Nick, and he took out his watch and looked at the time.

"You have no right to hang me," said Crystal, coldly.

"All right. I'll do it first, and argue it with you afterward."

"You are murdering me. I did not suppose that Nick Carter would do that."

"Which shows that you did not know Nick Carter."

"But you surely don't mean it."

"You will find out in just four minutes more. You escaped from the hangman once, and I don't intend that you shall do it again. I've got a private order for your execution."

"That is impossible."

"Anyhow, it's true."

"You do not even ask me any questions."

"What's the good? You wouldn't tell me the truth if I did."

"I might consent to do so on an occasion like this."

"What questions do you want me to ask you? Quick, now; you've only got three minutes."

"If you won't hang me, I'll tell you where to find Quartz."

"Humph! And Zanoni, as well?"

"Yes; and Zanoni. She is with him."

"So I supposed; but I reckon I can find them without your help."

"I don't think you can. They are well hidden."

"Oh, are they? Perhaps you will tell me first how you managed to take Zanoni from the hospital?"

"In the simplest manner in the world. I merely mesmerized the watchman at the door and then impressed upon his mind exactly what he was to tell you after I had gone."

"And the nurse?"

"I took my chances with her; but she was in another ward and saw nothing."

"But how did you get Zanoni?"

"She walked down the stairs to me. She has the power of suspending animation. She acquired it in India. There were certain hours of the day when she awoke; then she waited till they applied the electric batteries and pretended the rest. She always awoke at half-past twelve at night, but of course she let nobody know that."

"And you had a carriage outside, I suppose, and something to wrap around her; eh?"

"Just that."

"Dead easy, wasn't it?"

"Dead easy."

"In the case of Quartz, you used the Sindhar-Scutti, I suppose."

"Ah! You know about that?"

"So it would seem. Time is up, Crystal, and you haven't said those prayers yet."

"But I have answered your questions, and truthfully."

"Well, I'll grant you a reprieve for—let me see—three minutes."

"And then——"

"Why, then, I suppose we will proceed with the hanging."

"Even if I tell you where to find Quartz and Zanoni?"

"I wouldn't believe you."

"Suppose I should offer to take you to them?"

"Well, I might consider that, for I could kill you if you deceived me, and I could always say that I did it in self-defense."

"I will take you to them."

"First, where are they?"

"They are at a little house on the old Boston Road, or, rather, which sets back from the road, with a family named Burgoyne. They are under assumed names, and their identity is not suspected. Both are ill."

"You don't say so!"

Nick laughed aloud in the doctor's face, and then turned to Price.

"Pull that rope and swing him up," he ordered. As Nick spoke, the noose closed at Crystal's throat and jerked him in the air. Crystal made a frantic grab at the cord, succeeded in loosening it a little, and attempted to gurgle something to the detective.

Nick purposely had not fastened his hands so that he could not reach the rope. Now the doctor really believed that he was to be hung.

"Let him down," said Nick. "Maybe he wants to tell the truth this time."

Crystal was lowered again to the chair, and after he had recovered his breath somewhat, he gasped out:

"I will tell you the truth this time if you won't hang me. When Quartz escaped, we came here to this house. We got the irons off him and gave him a disguise. He left within an hour in a coupé I had here for him. He knew that you would pursue him, and he felt that the only way to evade you was to lie quiet until he recovered his health, at least, for prison life has broken him down considerably. To-day, since I have been out, I received a message from him. It is in my pocket now, and it will tell you exactly where he is. If you will feel in my breast pocket, you will find it."

Nick reached up and secured a package of letters from Crystal's pocket.

"It is that one. The last one," said Crystal; and Nick opened the letter and read, in the handwriting he knew so well:

"I have decided on my plans for the present. C. has worn me out, and I'm not fit to cope with him at present. That place I visited last was too much for me; perhaps the water was no good. I shall want to see you on Wednesday of next week. The only place where I feel that I can get any rest at all is in a prison of some kind, provided I am not known, and where I can secure delicacies by purchasing them. I have selected Ludlow Street jail in New York. I have a friend who knows how to have me committed there, and, of course, I can come out at any time—or, rather, my friend can get me out at any time I care to have him. There I can have a private room and all the delicacies of the best hotel, perfect rest and quiet, and that is all I need. I take some risk in sending you this, but I know you are faithful and that you will keep out of sight, as you have done so far. Come to me there next Wednesday, then, and ask for Peter Farquar. Come at 3 P. M. You might care to know about our young lady acquaintance. Since you took her from the hospital she has been really very ill. The strain was too much for her to go with me, and I left her at the Burgoynes, on Boston Road. She will be safe and have good care there."

That was all.

The letter was neither addressed nor signed, but it was evidently true. It sounded true.

Quartz was evidently tired out with his experience and wanted rest, and the only safe place where he could secure it was in a jail, from which he could be freed at any moment he demanded it, through the intervention of the friend who placed him there.

THE END.

Next week's issue, No. 420, will contain "Dr. Quartz's Last Play; or, A Hand With a Royal Flush."

NICK CARTER WEEKLY

THE BEST DETECTIVE STORIES IN THE WORLD

378—Ten-Ichi, the Wonderful; or, Nick Carter's Greatest Find.
379—The Mystery of the Mikado; or, Nick Carter in Japan.
380—An Emperor at Bay; or, Nick Carter Defies the Czar.
381—The Crime Behind the Throne; or, Nick Carter and the Palace Mystery.
382—Holding Up a Nation; or, The Little Giant Rules the World.
383—Kidnaped in Broad Daylight; or, Nick Carter on His Own Trail.
384—The Little Giant's Double; or, The World's Two Strongest Men.
385—The Secret Order of Associated Crooks; or, The Confederated Criminal Trust.
386—When Aces Were Trumps; or, A Hard Game to Play.
387—The Gambler's Last Hand; or, The Little Giant Wins Out.
388—The Murder at Linden Fells; or, The Mystery of the Cadillac Needle.
389—Mercedes Danton's Double; or, A Plot for Many Millions.
390—The Millionaire's Nemesis; or, Paul Roger's Oath of Vengeance.
391—A Princess of the Underworld; or, The Mysterious Burglary at Lakeview.
392—A Queen of Her Kind; or, A Beautiful Woman's Nerve.
393—Isabel Benton's Trump Card; or, Desperate Play to Win.
394—A Princess of Hades; or, The Reappearance of Dazaar, the Fiend.
395—A Compact with Dazaar; or, The Devil Worshiper's Den.
396—In the Shadow of Dazaar; or, At the Mercy of Vampires.
397—The Crime of a Money-King; or The Battle of the Magnates.
398—The Terrible Game of Millions; or, Tracking Down the Plotters.
399—A Dead Man's Power; or, The Mystery of a Telephone Number.
400—The Secrets of an Old House; or, The Crime of Washington Heights.
401—The House with the Open Door; or, The Double Crime of Madison Avenue.
402—The Society of Assassination; or, The Detective's Double Disguise.
403—The Brotherhood of the Crossed Swords; or, The Little Giant's Mighty Task.
404—The Trail of the Vampire; or, The Mysterious Crimes of Prospect Park.
405—The Demons of the Night; or, The Terrors of the Idol's Cavern.
406—The Captain of the Vampire; or, Smugglers of the Deep Sea.
407—A Bank President's Plot; or, Three Villains of a Stripe.
408—The Master Criminal; or, With the Devil in His Eye.
409—The Carruthers Puzzle; or, Nick Carter's Best Disguise.
410—Inez, the Mysterious; or, The Master Criminal's Mascot.
411—The Criminal Queen's Oath; or, The Difference Between Two.
412—The Point of a Dagger; or, The Criminal Queen's Madness.
413—Doctor Quartz, the Second; or, The Great Freight Car Mystery.
414—Doctor Quartz, the Second, at Bay; or, A Man of Iron Nerve.
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